

## Painting Chapter 2



# Northern Renaissance

# The Renaissance in Northern Europe

**ca. 1325-1600**

When we talk about the Northern Renaissance, what we actually mean is "Renaissance happenings that occurred within Europe, but outside of Italy." Because the most innovative art was created in France, the Netherlands and Germany during this time, and because all of these places are north of Italy, the "Northern" tag has stuck.

## **What were the differences between the Northern and Italian Renaissances?**

Geography aside, there were some significant differences between the Italian Renaissance and the Northern Renaissance. For one thing, the north held on to Gothic (or "Middle Ages") art and architecture with a tighter, longer grip than did Italy. (Architecture, in particular, remained Gothic until well into the 16th century.) This isn't to say that art wasn't changing in the north - in many instances it kept pace with Italian doings. The Northern Renaissance artists, however, were scattered about and few in number initially (very unlike their Italian counterparts).

The north had fewer centers of free commerce than did Italy. Italy, as we saw, had numerous Duchies and Republics which gave rise to a wealthy merchant class that often spent considerable funds on art. This wasn't the case in the north. In fact, the only notable similarity between northern Europe and, say, a place like Florence, lay in the Duchy of Burgundy.

Burgundy, until 1477, encompassed a territory from present-day middle France northward (in an arc) to the sea, and included Flanders (in modern Belgium) and parts of the current Netherlands. It was the only individual entity standing between France and the enormous Holy Roman Empire. Its Dukes, during the last 100 years it existed, were given monikers of "the Good," "the Fearless" and "the Bold".

The Burgundian Dukes were excellent patrons of the arts, but the art they sponsored was different from that of their Italian counterparts. Their interests were along the lines of illuminated manuscripts, tapestries and furnishings. Things were different in Italy, where patrons were keener on paintings, sculpture and architecture.

In the broader scheme of things, the social changes in Italy were inspired, as we've seen, by Humanism. Italian artists, writers and philosophers were driven to study Classical antiquity and explore man's supposed capacity for rational choice. They believed that Humanism led to more dignified and worthy humans. In the north (possibly in part because the north did not *have* works of antiquity from which to learn), change was brought about by a different rationale. Thinking minds in the north were more concerned with religious reform, feeling that Rome (from whom they were physically distanced) had strayed too far from Christian values. In fact, as northern Europe became more openly rebellious over the authority of the Church, art took a decidedly secular turn.

Additionally, Renaissance artists in the north took a different approach to composition than did Italian artists. Where an Italian artist was apt to consider scientific principles behind composition (i.e., proportion, anatomy, perspective) during the Renaissance, northern artists were more concerned with what their art *looked* like. Color was of key importance, above and beyond form. And the more detail a northern artist could cram into a piece, the happier he was. Close inspection of Northern Renaissance paintings will show the viewer numerous instances where individual hairs have been carefully rendered, along with every single object in the room including the artist himself, distantly inverted in a background mirror.

Finally, it's important to note that northern Europe enjoys different geophysical conditions than does (most of) Italy. For example, there are lots of stained glass windows in northern Europe partly for the practical reason that people living there have more need of barriers against the elements.

Italy, during the Renaissance (and, of course, beyond) produced some fabulous egg tempera paintings and frescoes, along with glorious marble statuary. There's an excellent reason the north isn't known for its frescoes: The climate isn't conducive to curing them. (Ditto for egg tempera painted on wood.) The north developed the chemistry of oil paints for this very reason. Artists needed a medium that would **dry** (however slowly) and last. Italy produced marble sculptures because, by gum, it has marble quarries. You'll note that Northern Renaissance sculpture is, by and large, worked in wood.

### **Were there any similarities between the Northern and Italian Renaissances?**

Until 1517, when Martin Luther lit the wildfire of Reformation, both places shared a common faith. In fact, it's interesting to note that what we now think of as Europe didn't think of *itself* as Europe, back during Renaissance days. If you had had the opportunity, at the time, to ask a European traveler in the Middle East or Africa where he hailed from, he likely would have answered "Christendom" - regardless of whether he was from Florence or Flanders.

Beyond providing a unifying presence, the Church supplied all artists of the period with a common subject matter. The earliest beginnings of northern Renaissance art are similar to the Italian Proto-Renaissance, in that each chose Christian religious stories and figures as the predominant artistic theme.

Another common factor that Italy and the rest of Europe shared during the Renaissance was the Guild system. Arising during the Middle Ages, Guilds were the best paths a man could take to learning a craft, be it painting, sculpture or making saddles. Training in any specialty was long, rigorous and comprised of sequential steps. Even after one completed a "masterpiece," and gained acceptance into a Guild, the Guild continued to keep tabs on standards and practices amongst its members.

Thanks to this self-policing policy, most of the money exchanging hands - when works of art were commissioned and paid for - went to Guild members. (As you might imagine, it was to an artist's financial benefit to belong to a Guild.) If possible, the Guild system was even more entrenched in northern Europe than it was in Italy.

After 1450, both Italy and northern Europe had access to printed materials. Though subject matter might vary from region to region, often it was the same - or similar enough to establish commonality of thought.

Finally, one significant similarity that Italy and the North shared was that each had a definite artistic "center" during the 15th century. In Italy, as previously mentioned, artists looked to the Republic of Florence for innovation and inspiration.

In the North, the artistic hub was Flanders. Flanders was a part, back then, of the Duchy of Burgundy. It had a thriving commercial city, Bruges, which (like Florence) made its money in banking and wool. Bruges had cash aplenty to spend on luxuries like art. And (again like Florence) Burgundy, on the whole, was governed by patronage-minded rulers. Where Florence had the Medici, Burgundy had Dukes. At least until the last quarter of the 15th century, that is.

In Burgundy, the Northern Renaissance got its start primarily in the graphic arts. Beginning in the 14th-century, an artist could make a good living if he was proficient in producing **illuminated manuscripts**. Now originally, illumination was intended to highlight a particular word or passage within a manuscript, and make it stand out in importance. Sometime during the 1300s, though, illumination went crazy.

The late 14th and early 15th centuries saw illumination take off and, in some cases, take *over* entire pages. Instead of relatively sedate red capital letters, we now saw whole paintings (albeit small in scale) crowding manuscript pages right out to the borders. The French Royals, in particular, were avid collectors of these manuscripts, which became so popular that text was rendered largely unimportant.

The best surviving early example of these richly illustrated manuscripts was created (from 1413-16) for the Duke of Berry by the Netherlandish painters known as the Limbourg Brothers. The "Book of Hours" (properly: *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*) contained religious scenes (there was no getting around that), as well as "calendar pages" that depicted nobles and peasants, alike, going about their business in the local countryside.

It only made sense that, since the paintings were the popular element of manuscripts, painting should move to a larger surface. Happily, it was now possible to paint on wood or canvas, in the north, due to the development of oil paints.

The Northern Renaissance artist who is largely credited with developing oil techniques was Jan van Eyck, court painter to the Duke of Burgundy. It's not that he discovered oil paints, but he did figure out how to layer them, in "glazes," to create light and depth of color in his paintings. The Flemish van Eyck, his brother Hubert, and their Netherlandish predecessor Robert Campin were all painters who created altarpieces in the first half of the fifteenth century.

Three other key Netherlandish artists were the painters Rogier van der Weyden and Hans Memling, and the sculptor Claus Sluter. Van der Weyden, who was the town painter of Brussels, was best known for introducing accurate human emotions and gestures into his work, which was primarily of a religious nature.

One other early Northern Renaissance artist that created a lasting stir was the enigmatic Hieronymus Bosch. No one can say what his motivation was, but he certainly created some darkly imaginative and highly unique paintings.

Something that all of these painters had in common was their use of naturalistic objects within compositions. Sometimes these objects had symbolic meanings, while at other times they were just there to illustrate aspects of daily life.

In taking in the 15th century, it's important to note that Flanders was the center of the Northern Renaissance. Just as with Florence - at this same time - Flanders was the place that northern artists looked to for "cutting edge" artistic techniques and technology. This situation persisted until 1477, when the last Burgundian Duke was defeated in battle and Burgundy ceased to exist.

France absorbed the southern parts of the former Duchy, while Flanders and the rest of the Netherlands passed into the hands of the Holy Roman Empire (whose seat of power was in Spain). Additionally, England now had a strong ruler and was a force to be reckoned with. All of these factors, combined, lessened Flanders' influence on the Northern Renaissance. In fact, art in the north began to flourish in many locations.

Germany became the hub of Northern Renaissance art. This occurred partially because there was a vacancy (where Flanders had been) in the top slot. More than that, the German merchant class (especially in the southern German provinces) had established some pretty close ties with the Italian banking and merchant classes. As a result, there was a lot of travel from Germany to Italy, and back again.

We used to suppose that a Northern artist traveling to Italy, during the time of the Renaissance, was a relatively rare thing. That wasn't the case at all. German artists, in particular, *frequently* headed off to Italy and spent months (or even years) moving about visiting with the Italian artists and studying their techniques, themes and materials. Word spread rapidly upon these artists' respective returns, and it wasn't long before most Northern artists were incorporating new ideas into their work.

Besides the time-tested Word of Mouth method of spreading information, Northern artists also had a new technology at their disposal. The printing press had recently been invented, with the result that etchings and engravings were now widely available (and highly portable). One Italian artist, in particular, was turning out engraved copies of contemporary Italian art left and right. **Marcantonio Raimondi** left us nothing original of his own, but he was responsible for sending copies of everyone else's work to the farthest corners of the globe (as we understood it, back then). German artists seem to have gotten hold of them first, though.

**Thanks largely to Albrecht Dürer, the North had a "High Renaissance" similar to Italy's.**

Albrecht Dürer made two trips to Italy specifically to study its art. He sparked what we now call the "High Renaissance" in the North by contributing in three major areas.

First, Dürer's sojourns to Padua and Venice didn't exactly leave him with a complete understanding of how those places used color, or even thoroughly at ease with nudes. But, he definitely understood the use of **line**. (Anyone who has ever seen his woodcuts and/or engravings will attest that Dürer was a true master of the use of line.) As the Northern artists had a long tradition of using and understanding line, Dürer's works (full of line as they were) told Northern artists all they needed to know about that which the Italian artists were trying to accomplish.

Secondly, because Dürer made prints far more often than he painted, his **graphic works** were both widely available and rapidly circulated. (To most artists, a picture is, truly, worth many, many thousands of words.) It is also worth noting that Dürer was, at the time, hugely successful as an artist. Smart artists have always known that some degree of imitating success may be profitable. That Dürer "set the pace" in the North's art was due to both his enormous talent and the fact that he was worth imitating (on more than one level).

Finally, Dürer also understood that the **elevated status** Italian artists were now enjoying was highly desirable for *any* artist. He was instrumental in bringing that Renaissance concept northward, too.

In sum, Dürer was an excellent translator. He understood the Italian Renaissance, and was able to convey its concepts to Northern artists using modified Northern techniques. Had he not been a good artist, or prolific publisher of his graphic works, it's doubtful that the Renaissance would have spread throughout the North as quickly as it did.

**The Northern "High Renaissance" coincided almost exactly with the same event in Italy.**

In retrospect, the High Renaissance in the North came about (and dissipated) at the same rate as did the High Renaissance in Italy - although for different reasons. Dürer, and the other great Northern name, **Matthias Grünewald**, were contemporaries of Raphael and Michelangelo. There was no sacking (as in Rome) in the North, but Dürer and Grünewald had both died by 1528 (as Raphael had, in 1520). It is thought that the Northern High Renaissance dwindled and disappeared due mainly to the region's religious struggles, as well as the aforementioned deaths.

For whatever reason, both High Renaissances were as brief as they were glorious. And - again as happened in Italy - the North entered into a "Late" Renaissance stage we now refer to as "Mannerism".

## Still-Life Painting in Northern Europe, 1600–1800

Still-life painting as an independent genre or specialty first flourished in the Netherlands during the early 1600s, although German and French painters (for example, Georg Flegel, *left*) were



also early participants in the development, and less continuous traditions of Italian and Spanish still-life painting date from the same period. Still-life motifs occur fairly frequently in manuscripts, books of hours, and panel paintings of the 1400s and 1500s,

Many of the objects depicted in these early works are symbolic of some quality of the Virgin or another religious figure (for example, the lily stands for purity), while other objects may remind the viewer of an

edifying concept such as worldly vanity or temperance (as in the case of Saint Eligius's mirror and scales).

Moralizing meanings are also common in independent still-life paintings of the seventeenth century, which range from such obviously didactic works as Jacques de Gheyn's *Vanitas Still Life* of 1603 (*right*) and Pieter Claesz's *Still Life with a Skull and a Writing Quill* of 1628 to rich displays of luxury items like Abraham van Beyeren's *Still Life with Lobster and Fruit* of the 1650s. In the latter work, the pocket watch, which symbolizes the fleeting nature of earthly pleasures, may be considered more of an intellectual conceit than a sober warning against the desire for material things like the objects depicted or the painting itself. A *Vanitas* still life (vanitas is Latin for vanity) refers to a type of still life consisting of a collection of objects that symbolize death — the brevity of human life and the transience of earthly pleasures and achievements (e.g., a human skull, a mirror, and broken pottery). Such paintings were particularly popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially in the Netherlands.



In general, the rise of still-life painting in the Northern and Spanish Netherlands (mainly in the cities of Antwerp, Middelburg, Haarlem, Leiden, and Utrecht) reflects the increasing urbanization of Dutch and Flemish society, which brought with it an emphasis on the home and personal possessions, commerce, trade, learning—all the aspects and diversions of everyday life. Floral still lifes were especially prominent in the early 1600s, and in their highly refined



execution and in their subjects and symbolism were addressed to a cultivated audience. Painters such as Ambrosias Bosschaert the Elder, Balthasar van der Ast, Roelandt Savery, and Jacob Vosmaer often referred to herbals and other botanical texts when composing "bouquets" (like Vosmaer's *A Vase of Flowers*; *left*), which typically combined flowers from different countries and even different continents in one vase and at one moment of blooming. For many courtly and wealthy merchants, a flower picture was part of a private domain that included a garden with rare specimens (which occasionally cost more than paintings of them), colored drawings or watercolors of rare tulips and other unusual flowers, and a small library of botanical books and prints.

While floral still lifes were especially popular in Antwerp (Jan Brueghel the Elder and Younger were among the main practitioners;), Middelburg, and the court city of The Hague, the so-called monochrome "banquet" or "breakfast" still life was more common in the mercantile city of Haarlem; artists arranged familiar foods (ham, cheese, oysters, and so on) and glasses of wine or beer on wooden tabletops. Vanitas still lifes were a specialty of Leiden artists. Large "market" and "kitchen" still lifes, which often include figures, were first popularized during the mid-1500s in Antwerp by Pieter Aertsen and his pupil Joachim Beuckelaer. Aertsen returned to his native Amsterdam in about 1557 and inspired Dutch painters such as Joachim and Peter Wtewael to paint similar works.

In the 1650s and 1660s, when Amsterdam became the social, political, and financial capital of the Netherlands, still-life painters produced fancy *pronk* (display) still lifes featuring imported fruits and expensive objects such as Chinese porcelain, Venetian glassware, and silver-gilt cups and trays, usually rendered in glistening light and a velvety atmosphere. In these works and later flower pictures the emphasis upon aesthetic appeal and decorative function evident in almost all still-life painting is more conspicuous than ever before. It was also in the second half of the 1600s that still lifes of dead game, or "hunting trophies" (like Jan Weenix's *Falconer's Bag* of 1695), created an aristocratic image of country life. In earlier decades, pictures of dead game had been more at home in the Spanish Netherlands, where Frans Snyders and his follower Jan Fyt turned images of unfortunate fowl, hares, deer, and other animals into essays in color and texture, and into testaments of life lived comfortably on sprawling estates. By 1700, Dutch, Flemish, German, and French specialties had become less clearly distinguishable, with Dutch painters working for foreign princes and the market for still lifes growing throughout Europe.

## Northern Renaissance Questions

1. What is meant by the “Northern” Renaissance? (Where did it occur?)
2. What were the differences between the Italian and the Northern Renaissances? (name 7)
3. What was the artistic center in the North?
4. Where is this place?
5. Describe how illuminated manuscripts led to full paintings.
6. What is one of the best known surviving illuminated manuscript and who were the artists?
7. Who discovered how to glaze or layer oil paint?
8. What led to the decline of Flanders as a seat of influence?
9. How did German artists learn about what was going on in Italy?
10. What/who caused the High Renaissance in Germany? How?
11. Why were still lifes painted?
12. What is a *Vanitas*?
13. What was significant about floral still lifes?
14. What was significant about Dutch Still lifes?